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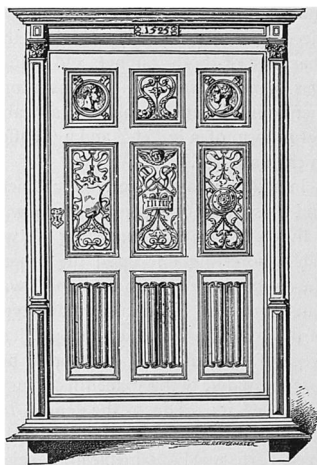
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## FRENCH CABINETS AND ARMOIRES OF THE XVI. CENTURY.

BY EDMOND BONAFFÉ.



OAK ARMOIRE, DATED 1525.  
(COLLECTION OF M. BLIGNY.)

PROPERLY speaking, an armoire is a vacant space in the wall, inclosed by the wood-work of the wainscoting, the panels of which open and form doors. The word "relai" was also used in the old French to indicate an armoire; in the sixteenth century Richelieu ordered "a wainscoting six feet high, with a fine 'relai' to store curiosities," to be made at his chateau. These cupboards, as they are now called, were used as wardrobes, book-cases, cabinets, and safes for food.

It is impossible to decide whether the armoires of "monseigneur's closet" at Gaillon, ornamented with marquetry

by Micheller Gouesnon, were a succession of cupboards or isolated pieces of furniture, but the armoires of the cabinet of Francis I., at Fontainebleau, were undoubtedly made in the wainscoting. The armoire as a piece of furniture was rare during the early part of the sixteenth century.

Corrozet, who minutely describes beds, chairs, benches, dressers, etc.,—in fact, "all the decorations of well-ordered households and the service therein," does not mention the armoire. The specimens of furniture of this family and epoch which have been handed down to us are ordinarily composed of a uniform series of small panels, separated by uprights, spindles, and pilasters resembling detached portions of wainscoting made into separate pieces of furniture. They come, as a rule, from sacristies, and were used as receptacles for gold work, sacred vases, reliquaries, and sacerdotal vestments. The more simple armoires for ordinary use were put in store-rooms and garrets, and used for storing linen and clothing. The model with small panels opening outward was used during the whole of the sixteenth century. "A large armoire, with ten doors, also a large armoire with three fronts and forty-four doors, beginning at the chimney and extending to the garret door," are mentioned in the Inventory of Catherine de Médicis, 1589. "A pair of armoires with four large oaken doors, made for

clothing, and supplied with locks and keys," is given in the Inventory of Gabrielle d'Estrées.

A fine piece of furniture, designed as a receptacle for jewelry and delicate toilet appliances, was often called an *armoire*, but more frequently a *cabinet*.

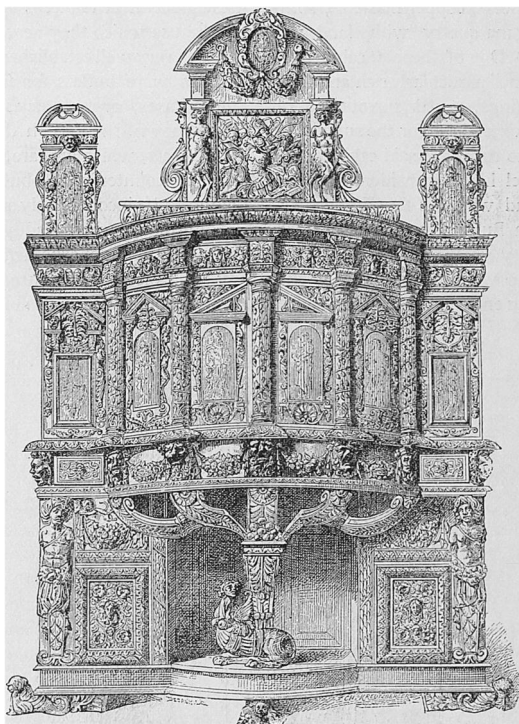
The word cabinet, which cannot be traced farther back than the sixteenth century, is one of those elastic terms encountered at every step in the old French. Sometimes it signified a piece of furniture, sometimes a room, where costly objects, paintings, books, and curiosities were kept. The following extract from the Inventory of Louise of Lorraine, widow of Henry III., will give some idea of the two significations: "This done, we left the said cabinet, called the library, having taken from it a cabinet of German workmanship to place in the cabinet of the said defunct queen, called the green cabinet, being the one next to the library." The term was also used to indicate several compartments in one, for holding precious objects.

Neither was the form of the cabinet very well defined. The principle was a chest with two handles, opening in front and containing numerous drawers. Sometimes it was closed by two panels, sometimes by a front which lowered in the form of a writing-table. In this case, one of the drawers was made into a receptacle for pens and ink. The cabinet secretary was generally called a German cabinet. The portable cabinet was made to be placed on tables, chests, or trestles.

Later, when furniture became more stable, the cabinet was permanently fixed on an open support, and was analogous to the dresser or buffet, as the upper part was full and the lower

empty; the cabinet, however, was longer, higher, and more delicate in form and workmanship; as a rule it had neither back nor upper shelves and terminated in a pedestal. The cabinet seemed to be made to inclose precious objects, while the buffet was designed to display them; nevertheless, toward the close of the sixteenth century a piece of furniture which partook of the character of both cabinet and buffet was manufactured. An old inventory mentions a "buffet or cabinet," a "cabinet in form of a buffet," and a "buffet in cabinet form."

In addition to the portable cabinets and those fixed on a support, there was a third combination, consisting of two cabinets resting one upon the other; the double *armoire* with four doors was thus evolved. This last model, type of the true *armoire* as an independent piece of furniture, did not appear before the middle of the sixteenth century, and owed its origin to the general reform in furniture inaugurated by the master artists of Fontainebleau. Fashion hastened to adopt the new style of furniture, which was elegant and at the same time practical and permitted the beautiful display of all the precious baubles of the feminine toilet. They were called, as before, *armoires* or cabinets: "A walnut and marquetry cabinet, six feet high, with locks and four doors, ornamented with white moresque and lined inside and on top with dark crimson velvet and silver ribbon." (Gouffiersale, 1572.) The interior was often lined with cloth-of-gold or, more simply, with "green silk." The silver ribbon, ingeniously interlaced, formed on the back of the doors and of the cabinet a geometrical lattice-work, presenting at each intersection a gilded copper hook



HENRY III. CABINET IN WALNUT.  
BESANÇON MUSEUM.

on which to hang jewelry, watches, chaplets, and pocket mirrors. Thus arranged the armoire was often used as a wedding present, and gilded nail-heads outlined on the ornamentation the monogram of bride and groom, an emblem, and a date, which indicates the period to which all similar pieces of furniture belong.

The armoire cabinet was, as a rule, a choice piece of furniture delicately carved. The Gouffier cabinet has just been cited, and Catherine de Médicis

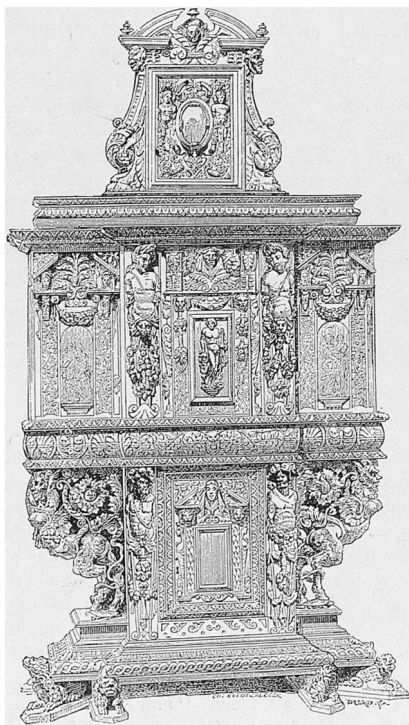
kept her personal library in a beautiful armoire with four doors, and the family portraits in "a painted and gilded wooden cabinet eight feet high by three feet wide, with four panels." In the inventory of Gauthiot d'Ancier, who was Governor of Besançon, and a great lover of fine furniture, are counted a dozen magnificent cabinets loaded with bass-reliefs, caryatids, satyrs, and "bronze figures" varnished and ornamented with beaten gold. Some bore "silver eagles," others "gold me-

dallions," or "copper masks"; some were of marquetry with landscape interiors. One of these "cabinets in buffet form," particularly rich and filled with paintings, "was surrounded on top with a metal rod for the support of a curtain to cover the said cabinet."

A model highly considered by collectors, and which is found more frequently in Burgundy than elsewhere, is the very small cabinet suspended against the wall by means of hooks. Du Cerceau engraved two specimens of

these graceful little pieces of furniture, but the use which they served has not yet been very well established. Whether they were buffets for fine wines, liqueur-cases, or receptacles for papers is not known. Although these hanging cabinets, which are rare, have been skillfully counterfeited, but few are known to be incontestably authentic.

The armoire is more readily adapted to all uses and styles of ornamentation than any other piece of furniture. Its large surface, double body, size of front and



HENRY III. CABINET IN WALNUT.  
COLLECTION OF BARON SELLÈRES.

back, the variety of elements which compose it—panels, frames, uprights, friezes, crowns—all lend themselves to every variety of combination. It affords the artist an opportunity of giving rein to his invention; architect, decorator, carpenter, or sculptor, he has the chance to display his specialty; even the painter finds place for his work on the panels, whether in “gris-sailles” or pictures enriched with gold.

Each school has in turn interpreted after its own manner the original type, changing, modifying, and adapting it to its proper use. The school of the Isle of France constructed a high armoire, composed of two nearly equal parts, straight, compact, and without side pieces to increase the value of the work. This cabinet is small, the composition carefully studied, the execution delicate, carved in low relief, the frames and moldings in one, the unadorned spaces always in opposition to the decorated ones. The modest, clear, and evenly distributed ornamentation is divided into partitions and medallions, covered with beautiful goddesses, reclining nymphs,

allegorical figures, and swans with graceful necks; the influence of Jean Goujon is apparent.

The model of the school of the Isle of France belongs properly to the borders of the Seine and Loire. It is found more or less altered in other localities, but these changed forms are exceptions; transplanted by accident, they have either strayed from their original home or are the work of wandering sculptors. Another form is the armoire of central and southern France, that which reigns from Limoges to Spain, and from Dijon to the Mediterranean. Ample, majestic, and wide, its strong supports form a part of the body and bring it out into full relief. The shape is sometimes square and composed of two equal parts; sometimes the upper portion is set very far back, resting on strong supports affixed to a wide slab. All is richly carved, engraved, decorated, moldings as well as flat surfaces, friezes as well as bases. Burgundy, Lyons, and the Mediterranean showed special talent in the production of these armoires.

